CHOOSING RACE: EVIDENCE FROM THE

LATINO NATIONAL POLITICAL SURVEY (LNPS)

by

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and

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"If you had a choice of colors, which one would you choose, my brother?"
Curtis Mayfield

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INTRODUCTION

In virtually all empirical social science research, the self-reported race of respondents in large-scale survey research in the USA is taken as an immutable and exogenous attribute. This is generally the case, despite the fact that racial classification is determined by *self-reports* in data sets ranging from the decennial census to major longitudinal surveys like the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), and more specialized surveys like the four city Multi-City Study of urban Inequality (MCSUI). Self-identification of race – an act of selection on the part of the respondent – begs for consideration of race as a matter of endogenous choice. What does the individual *prefer* as his or her racial identity?

In this investigation, we treat self-reported race as a matter of constrained choice – constrained by phenotype or the individual's physical appearance – in a representative national sample of the three largest Latino groups in the USA, the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS). The LNPS is a survey of 2,807 respondents taken in the USA between 1989-1990 from three countries of origin: Mexico, Cuba and Puerto Rico. The survey included an *open-ended* question asking respondents what they considered their race to be, and, in addition, interviewers graded respondents on a salient phenotypical dimension, their skin shade.

As Table 1 indicates, the majority of respondents in the LNPS were of Mexican origin, followed by Cubans and Puerto Ricans, the latter two national groups represented in similar proportions in the sample. The numbers in each of the subgroups are sufficient to facilitate examination of choice of race both in the overall sample and separately by national origin subgroup. Interviewers were prepared to administer the questionnaires in Spanish or in English. Slightly less than 40 percent of the respondents (1,021 or 36.4 percent) spoke only

Spanish. Sixty-four percent (1,794) of the respondents were first generation immigrants, 21

percent (593) were second generation, and 15 percent (397) were third generation.

TABLE 1			
Distribution of Respondents to the LNPS by Country of Origin			
COUNTRY	FREQUENCY	PERCENT	CUMULATIVE PERCENT
Mexican Origin/de origen Mexicano	1541	54.9	54.9
Puerto Rican/Puertorrique o	588	20.95	75.85
Cuban/Cubano	677	24.12	99.96
Combination of Mexican origin & Cuban	1	0.04	100
TOTAL	2807	100	

Table 2 provides a display of the variety of answers given by survey participants to the

race question. What is striking is the fact that a substantial majority of respondents chose to

self identify racially as white. About two percent – only 52 respondents – chose to classify

themselves as black. The remainder typically chose color oriented labels, intermediate

between black and white, or national group labels, either collective like Latino or country

specific (e.g. "Mi raza es Puertorrique o").

In what follows, we will collapse the latter responses into a single category, "other" than

white or black. Thus, for the purposes of this paper 62 percent of respondents said they are

racially white, 2 percent said they are black, and 36 percent chose another category, neither

black nor white. The numbers do suggest that Latinos in this sample obviously were not

following the dictates of a "one-drop rule" or notions of hypodescent with respect to black self-

identification, since estimates run as high as 75 percent of the populations of Cuba, Mexico,

and Puerto Rico having African ancestry (Cruz-Janzen, p. 174). Perhaps they were following a "one-drop rule" with respect to whiteness.

TABLE 2			
Distribution of Respondents to the Race Question in the LNPS			
SELF-REPORTED RACE	FREQUENCY	PERCENT	CUMULATIVE PERCENT
White	1731	61.67	61.67
Black (Negro)	52	1.85	63.52
Or Something Else	79	2.81	66.33
National Label (e.g. Hispanic/Latino)	514	18.31	84.65
Color Oriented Label (e.g. Moreno/Trigueno)	382	13.61	98.25
Race Label (e.g. Mulatto/N. American Indian)	29	1.03	99.29
Refused	1	0.04	99.32
Do Not Know	12	0.43	99.75
No Answer	7	0.25	100
TOTAL	**2807**	**100**	

Table 3 provides summary statistics on the phenotypical characteristics of respondents with respect to their skin shade, based upon the interviewers' assessments. A slight plurality of participants in the survey were graded as having a medium skin shade out of the five categories used by the interviewers ("very dark", "dark", "medium", "light", "very light"), closely followed by those graded as having a light skin shade. Comparable numbers were placed in the dark and very light categories. The smallest number of respondents (59) were rated as having a very dark skin tone.

TABLE 3			
Distribution of Skin Shades Among Respondents to the LNPS			
SKIN SHADE	FREQUENCY	PERCENT	CUMULATIVE PERCENT
Very Dark	59	2.1	2.1
Dark	409	14.57	16.67
Medium	992	35.34	52.01
Light	928	33.06	85.07
Very Light	400	14.25	99.32
No Answer	19	0.68	100
TOTAL	2807	100	

In Table 4, we can examine how the interviewers grading of individual skin shade corresponds to the individual's self-reported race.

TABLE 4						
Cross Tabulations of Race by Interviewer-Reported Skin Color (LNPS)						
Interviewer-Reported Skin Color	Self-Reported Race					
	White	Black	Other	Missing	Total Percentage	(Total N)
Very Dark	32.20	27.12	40.68	0.00	100.00	(59)
Dark	35.94	4.65	58.19	1.22	100.00	(409)
Medium	53.13	1.21	44.86	0.81	100.00	(992)
Light	75.22	0.54	23.60	0.65	100.00	(928)
Very Light	82.75	0.00	17.25	0.00	100.00	(400)
No Answer	47.37	0.00	47.37	5.26	100.00	(19)
TOTAL	1731	52	1004	20		(2807)

What Table 4 demonstrates is a general Latino preference to be identified as white (see Darity, Hamilton and Dietrich for a related discussion in the context of labor market discrimination). While most of the very dark and dark respondents chose a racial category other than black or

white, more than one-third chose to self-identify as white. The majority of respondents identified as having a medium skin shade by the interviewers self-reported their race as white. In the two lightest categories about 80 percent of the respondents said they were white, largely eschewing the "other" categories never mind the black category. As skin shade lightens more and more respondents chose white as their race, but significant proportions of darker-skinned respondents did so as well.

As Table 5 indicates, the preference for racial self-identification as white among Latinos attenuates somewhat the longer one is in the USA. The proportion of Latinos self-identifying as white falls with each generation more distant from immigration. Note, however, there is no evidence of an increasing preference for a black racial identity. If anything, black Latinos continue to disappear based upon *self-reported* race, just as they have disappeared historically in national data in Latin American countries. The second and third generations shift more and more toward self-classifications other than white or black. In particular, they demonstrate a growing preference for the collective national labels as race classifiers, Latino or Hispanic (see Table 6).

TABLE 5			
Choice of Race by Immigrant Generation (LNPS)			
	FIRST GENERATION	SECOND GENERATION	THIRD GENERATION
White	0.66	0.57	0.52
Black	0.02	0.03	0.01
Other	0.32	0.40	0.47
TOTAL N	**1794**	**593**	**397**

TABLE 6			
Percentage of Respondents Who Self-Identified as Hispanic or Latino by Immigrant Generation			
	FIRST GENERATION	SECOND GENERATION	THIRD GENERATION
Hispanic or Latino	0.27	0.42	0.50
Neither	0.73	0.58	0.50
TOTAL N	**1794**	**593**	**397**

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

To explore the determinants of Latino choice of race systematically we employed a multinomial logistical regression where our respondent variables are race as white or race as black with all other categories as the omitted reference group. We employ three different specifications. Our most parsimonious specification included the respondents skin shade, gender, age, income, and self-reported exposure to discrimination as independent variables.

The skin shade variable was included on the presumption that personal appearance may constrain an individual's choice of race. We included a gender variable to establish whether there were gender differences in patterns of racial preference among Latinos in the LNPS. Age was included to isolate whether there are cohort effects; for example, did younger respondents have a stronger or weaker inclination to choose white as their race? Income was included to test the conventional proposition, widely asserted, that "money whitens" (for discussion of this proposition see Nutini and see de la Cadena). If the proposition holds, higher income respondents, *ceteris paribus,* should have been more inclined to choose white as their race. Finally, we included a variable to capture whether an individual reported having been exposed to discrimination. If so, *a priori,* we would expect such an experience to have reduced

the likelihood that the respondent would see themselves as white, the racial group least likely to be subjected to discrimination.

Our second set of regressions retained all the variables in our first set and incorporated three more: immigrant generation status (with first generation immigrants as the reference category), Spanish usage (with some Spanish or English only as the reference category), and marital status cum ethnicity of the spouse (with Latino/a spouse as the reference category). Finally, we estimated a third set of regressions that included all the preceding dependent variables as well as one more, an interaction term between income and dark or very dark skin shade to reinforce our test of the "money whitens" hypothesis.

Each specification was applied to the subsamples for Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans separately and then to the entire data set for all respondents to the LNPS (see Table 7 through 10). In the regressions performed on the entire sample we also included a variable for nationality with Mexicans as the reference group. For Cuban respondents (Table 7) exposure to discrimination has no statistically significant effects on choice of race. Nor does gender, age, or income. As might be expected, having a relatively darker skin shade reduces the odds that an individual will self-report their race as white.

There is some mild evidence that having a very dark skin color increases the odds that the individual will self identify as black, but in our most comprehensive specification even that effect evaporates. However, we do find intriguing evidence that second generation immigrant status raises the odds that a Cuban respondent will identify as black but third generation immigrant status does not. Speaking Spanish only also increases the odds of a self-report of race as black, and, perhaps most interesting, the interaction term for yearly income with dark or very dark skin shade is statistically significant and *positive*. Higher income and darker skin is associated with a greater likelihood of black self-identification, the opposite of the prediction of the money whitening hypothesis.

In contrast, for Puerto Ricans (Table 8) none of the dependent variables except skin color has a statistically significant systematic effect on choice of race. With respect to skin shade, a relatively darker skin shade generally tends to lower the odds an individual will select white and raise the odds they will select black. The results for Mexican respondents (Table 9) are similar to those for Puerto Ricans, with three exceptions. Having a darker skin shade does not have a statistically significant effect on the odds of choosing black as one's race. Being younger reduces the odds that an individual will choose white as their race, but it does not affect the odds of their choosing black. Moreover, in the most comprehensive regressions, being very dark does not have a statistically significant effect in reducing the odds of choosing white as one's race.

For all Latinos (Table 10) there is some mild evidence that exposure to discrimination reduces the odds the individual will select white as their race, but the effect on choosing black is not increased. Cubans and Puerto Ricans were more inclined to choose white or black relative to all other categories in contrast with Mexicans, who tended comparatively to prefer racial self classification in a category apart from white or black. There also is some mild evidence that a person with a spouse who is neither Latina/o nor Anglo was more likely to select black as their race. Apart from the skin shade effect, the only other factor coming into play was generational status. Second generation immigrant Latinos were more inclined to self-report their race as black relative to first or third generation immigrants. With respect to skin tone, the general result again is a darker skin shade tends to reduce the odds a person will self-identify as white and increase the odds they will identify as black.

TABLE 7

Beta Coefficients for Multinomial Logistic Regression on Racial Identity for Cubans in LNPS
Reference Group for Dependent Variable: All Other Categories

	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
Has R Experienced Discrimination?						
Discrim	0.006	0.735	-0.118	0.405	-0.101	1.307
	(0.586)	(0.894)	(0.602)	(0.971)	(0.605)	(1.050)
R's Skin Color: Ref: Light						
VDark	-3.884	3.820	-4.195	4.659	-4.149	1.954
	(1.481)**	(1.431)**	(1.657)*	(1.766)**	(1.865)*	(2.082)
Dark	-2.197	1.755	-2.363	2.303	-2.405	-0.775
	(0.669)**	(1.124)	(0.708)**	(1.298)	(1.072)*	(1.859)
Medium	-1.381	-0.115	-1.376	0.154	-1.390	0.436
	(0.533)**	(1.162)	(0.556)*	(1.228)	(0.556)*	(1.265)
VLight	0.405	-31.148	0.565	-36.533	0.561	-33.101
	(0.824)	(6805968)	(0.839)	(113171555)	(0.839)	(19558863)
FEMALE	0.193	1.306	0.231	1.154	0.237	1.515
	-0.435	0.822	-0.460	-0.857	-0.459	-0.960
Age	0.018	0.027	0.008	0.020	0.008	0.025
	(0.013)	(0.024)	(0.014)	(0.025)	(0.014)	(0.028)
Income3	0.014	0.035	0.016	0.036	0.013	-0.020
	(0.016)	(0.025)	(0.016)	(0.027)	(0.017)	(0.048)
R's Generational Status. Ref: First Generation						
ThirdGen			-2.344	-39.901	-2.319	-33.812
			(1.461)	(1,653,756,59)	(1.456)	(341591074)
SecondGen			0.074	3.246	0.067	5.606
			(0.773)	(1.454)*	(0.771)	(1.855)**
Language R Speaks at Home. Ref: Some or Only English						
SpanOnly			0.856	1.628	0.868	3.968
			(0.506)	(1.030)	(0.512)	(1.537)**
Marital Status/Ethnicity of R's Spouse. Ref: Latino/a Spouse						
Nospouse			-0.613	-0.681	-0.592	-0.381
			(0.498)	(0.885)	(0.502)	(0.981)
AngloSpouse			-1.977	-40.501	-1.947	-36.520
			(0.846)*	(318272122)	(0.847)*	(59641309)
OtherSpouse			0.391	-1.063	0.364	-1.511
			(1.362)	(1.928)	(1.363)	(2.483)
Interaction Term: Yearly Income Dark or Very Dark Skin*						
IncxDVDark					0.002	0.210
					(0.054)	(0.090)*
Constant	2.643	-4.401	3.078	-5.155	3.127	-7.464
	(0.973)**	(1.980)*	(1.084)**	(2.238)*	(1.078)**	(3.175)*
Observations	670	670	669	669	669	669

Standard Errors in Parentheses

*Significant at 5% level. **Significant at 1% level.

TABLE 8					
Beta Coefficients for Multinomial Logistic Regression on Racial Identity for Puerto Ricans in LNPS Reference Group for Dependent Variable: All Other Categories					
White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
Has R Experienced Discrimination?					
Discrim	-0.397	-0.066	-0.351	-0.010	-0.351	0.013
	(0.202)*	(0.448)	(0.205)	(0.472)	(0.205)	(0.476)
R's Skin Color: Ref: Light					
VDark	-0.502	3.752	-0.567	4.166	-0.551	4.368
	(0.670)	(0.984)**	(0.676)	(1.045)**	(0.771)	(1.191)**
Dark	-1.885	2.035	-1.890	2.223	-1.872	2.435
	(0.323)**	(0.796)*	(0.327)**	(0.826)**	(0.487)**	(1.013)*
Medium	-0.788	1.043	-0.815	1.242	-0.815	1.253
	(0.213)**	(0.797)	(0.216)**	(0.825)	(0.216)**	(0.828)
VLight	0.407	-36.397	0.455	-41.427	0.455	-29.855
	(0.331)	(107465259)	(0.335)	(1,338,550,17)	(0.335)	(4099784)
FEMALE	-0.016	-0.666	-0.017	-0.628	-0.018	-0.635
	-0.198	-0.427	-0.202	-0.459	-0.202	-0.460
Age	0.016	-0.008	0.011	-0.004	0.011	-0.005
	(0.006)**	(0.014)	(0.007)	(0.017)	(0.007)	(0.018)
Income3	0.005	-0.040	0.007	-0.039	0.007	-0.032
	(0.007)	(0.021)	(0.007)	(0.022)	(0.007)	(0.028)
R's Generational Status. Ref: First Generation					
ThirdGen			0.202	2.235	0.210	2.229
			(0.991)	(1.350)	(0.992)	(1.350)
SecondGen			-0.112	0.267	-0.112	0.243
			(0.247)	(0.562)	(0.248)	(0.566)
Language R Speaks at Home. Ref: Some or Only English					
SpanOnly			0.389	0.386	0.388	0.384
			(0.234)	(0.565)	(0.234)	(0.566)
Marital Status/Ethnicity of R's Spouse. Ref: Latino/a Spouse					
Nospouse			-0.190	0.759	-0.190	0.744
			(0.216)	(0.611)	(0.216)	(0.610)
AngloSpouse			0.029	0.524	0.031	0.523
			(0.516)	(1.266)	(0.518)	(1.268)
OtherSpouse			-0.729	2.197	-0.725	2.202
			(0.497)	(0.881)*	(0.497)	(0.879)*
Interaction Term: Yearly Income Dark or Very Dark Skin*					
IncxDVDark					-0.001	-0.014
					(0.019)	(0.039)
Constant	0.284	-2.049	0.519	-3.352	0.518	-3.419
	(0.361)	(1.016)*	(0.429)	(1.279)**	(0.429)	(1.296)**
Observations	581	581	581	581	581	581
Standard Errors in Parentheses					
*Significant at 5% level. **Significant at 1% level.					

TABLE 9

Beta Coefficients for Multinomial Logistic Regression on Racial Identity for Mexican Respondents
Reference Group for Dependent Variable: All Other Categories

	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
Has R Experienced Discrimination?						
Discrim	-0.156	-32.393	-0.156	-41.227	-0.152	-30.230
	(0.114)	(7476728)	(0.116)	(568803590)	(0.116)	(2279153)
R's Skin Color: Ref: Light						
VDark	-0.904	1.904	-0.895	21.046	-0.574	19.642
	(0.393)*	(1.576)	(0.396)*	(5340.906)	(0.438)	(5241.307)
Dark	-1.056	0.373	-1.079	0.801	-0.745	0.414
	(0.164)**	(1.271)	(0.165)**	(1.365)	(0.251)**	(2.018)
Medium	-0.628	-33.608	-0.651	-41.623	-0.645	-30.702
	(0.133)**	(12965470)	(0.134)**	(804177293)	(0.134)**	(3056085)
VLight	0.372	-33.019	0.367	-40.592	0.363	-28.775
	(0.200)	(25549281)	(0.201)	(1,547,335,12)	(0.201)	(5868435)
FEMALE	0.200	0.184	0.182	0.284	0.180	0.475
	-0.111	-1.116	-0.113	-1.362	-0.113	-1.420
Age	0.021	-0.045	0.020	-0.026	0.020	-0.031
	(0.004)**	(0.052)	(0.004)**	(0.045)	(0.004)**	(0.045)
Income3	-0.009	-0.063	-0.010	-0.048	-0.008	-0.124
	(0.003)**	(0.057)	(0.004)**	(0.056)	(0.004)	(0.133)
R's Generational Status. Ref: First Generation						
ThirdGen			0.283	19.720	0.283	19.766
			(0.155)	(5341)	(0.155)	(5241)
SecondGen			0.286	20.029	0.288	20.057
			(0.155)	(5341)	(0.155)	(5241)
Language R Speaks at Home. Ref: Some or Only English						
SpanOnly			0.124	0.786	0.122	0.857
			(0.148)	(1.940)	(0.148)	(1.890)
Marital Status/Ethnicity of R's Spouse. Ref: Latino/a Spouse						
Nospouse			-0.077	37.796	-0.081	37.386
			(0.120)	(5341)	(0.120)	(5241)
AngloSpouse			0.145	-4.043	0.148	6.397
			(0.216)	(1,903,692,98)	(0.217)	(7674482)
OtherSpouse			-0.361	38.696	-0.376	38.419
			(0.292)	(5340.907)	(0.293)	(5241.307)
Interaction Term: Yearly Income* Dark or Very Dark Skin						
IncxDVDark					-0.016	0.103
					(0.009)	(0.145)
Constant	-0.157	-2.055	-0.227	-59.565	-0.287	-58.253
	(0.213)	(2.155)	(0.241)	0.000	(0.243)	0.000
Observations	1517	1517	1509	1509	1509	1509

Standard Errors in Parentheses

*Significant at 5% level. **Significant at 1% level.

	MODEL 1	MODEL 2	MODEL 3	MODEL 4	MODEL 5	MODEL 6
TABLE 10 Beta Coefficients for Multinomial Logistic Regression on Racial Identity for All Respondents Reference Group for Dependent Variable: All Other Categories						
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
Has R Experienced Discrimination?						
Discrim	-0.206	0.052	-0.197	-0.023	-0.197	-0.040
	(0.097)*	(0.357)	(0.099)*	(0.371)	(0.099)*	(0.373)
R's Skin Color: Ref: Light						
VDark	-1.080	3.959	-1.012	4.231	-0.723	3.728
	(0.337)**	(0.619)**	(0.336)**	(0.653)**	(0.373)	(0.781)**
Dark	-1.269	1.951	-1.295	2.146	-1.013	1.690
	(0.141)**	(0.528)**	(0.142)**	(0.542)**	(0.214)**	(0.681)*
Medium	-0.714	0.553	-0.732	0.671	-0.729	0.654
	(0.109)**	(0.548)	(0.110)**	(0.553)	(0.110)**	(0.552)
VLight	0.362	-35.561	0.365	-28.773	0.364	-44.227
	(0.165)*	(41652568)	(0.166)*	(1427370)	(0.166)*	0.000
FEMALE	0.128	0.013	0.127	0.002	0.124	0.014
	-0.094	-0.335	-0.095	-0.349	-0.095	-0.351
Age	0.019	0.002	0.019	0.005	0.019	0.004
	(0.003)**	(0.011)	(0.003)**	(0.012)	(0.003)**	(0.012)
Income3	-0.005	-0.018	-0.006	-0.018	-0.004	-0.039
	(0.003)	(0.012)	(0.003)	(0.013)	(0.003)	(0.023)
R's National Origin - Ref: Mexican						
Cuban	2.687	5.349	2.751	5.698	2.746	5.719
	(0.215)**	(0.620)**	(0.220)**	(0.710)**	(0.220)**	(0.712)**
PRican	0.149	3.391	0.239	3.664	0.247	3.650
	(0.107)	(0.556)**	(0.115)*	(0.642)**	(0.115)*	(0.642)**
R's Generational Status. Ref: First Generation						
ThirdGen			0.277	1.561	0.277	1.580
			(0.144)	(0.991)	(0.144)	(0.916)
SecondGen			0.230	1.082	0.229	1.123
			(0.124)	(0.458)*	(0.124)	(0.465)*
Language R Speaks at Home. Ref: Some or Only English						
SpanOnly			0.191	0.600	0.188	0.659
			(0.117)	(0.430)	(0.117)	(0.432)
Marital Status/Ethnicity of R's Spouse. Ref: Latino/a Spouse						
Nospouse			-0.136	0.672	-0.139	0.704
			(0.101)	(0.407)	(0.101)	(0.414)
AngloSpouse			0.013	-0.329	0.019	-0.383
			(0.194)	(1.134)	(0.195)	(1.143)
OtherSpouse			-0.362	1.537	-0.370	1.525
			(0.238)	(0.633)*	(0.238)	(0.650)*
Interaction Term: Yearly Income Dark or Very Dark Skin*						
IncxDVDark					-0.014	0.031
					(0.008)	(0.027)
Constant	-0.032	-6.396	-0.127	-7.949	-0.167	-7.657
	(0.182)	(0.892)**	(0.203)	(1.059)**	(0.205)	(1.097)**
Observations	2769	2769	2760	2760	2760	2760
Standard Errors in Parentheses. *Significant at 5% level. **Significant at 1% level.						

CONCLUSIONS

Skin shade (or phenotype) clearly influences choice of racial category among Latinos, but this is complicated by the fact that so few respondents chose the black category and a significant share of darker respondents chose the white category. The "money whitens" hypothesis finds no support in the LNPS from the standpoint of self-identification; in fact, our findings for Cubans point toward a relationship opposite the one predicted by the hypothesis. When we added educational attainment or replaced income with educational attainment in the regressions, it was statistically insignificant and did not alter our results.

The most powerful factor governing choice of race consistently across all the regressions was skin shade, but even then there was not a perfect relationship. Lighter complexioned Latinos simply would not choose black as their racial category, but darker complexioned Latinos often would choose white as their racial category. This is reflective of a general Latino preference for whiteness. That preference appears to weaken somewhat in Latinos more removed from the generation of immigration with preference shifting toward a self-designated race classification as "Latino" or "Hispanic." Regardless, the overall tendency is to pass on blackness.

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